

Russian Elections: Déjà Vu for Belarusians?

In Russia's recent elections to the State Duma the ruling United Russia party won. The Russian opposition claims that the authorities falsified the results in favour of Putin's party. Similar to Belarusian authorities, the Kremlin put pressure on independent observers, falsified the results to a certain degree and temporarily blocked independent sources of information. But overall the Russian elections and handling of post-election protests were much more democratic than in Belarus.

What kind of changes will these elections bring to Russian politics and what consequences will they have for Belarus? Although the elections and post-election protests were an important political development for Russia itself, they will not be a game changer for Belarus-Russia relations. However, Russia's policy towards Belarus may change following presidential elections in 2012.

Political Spectrum of the New Duma

Various observers note that despite quite convincing victory as provided by Western standards, United Russia lost a big percentage of support among the population as well as the absolute majority needed to adopt federal constitutional laws. According only to official data, the United Russia's vote share decreased by 15% in comparison with previous elections. United Russia enjoys the widest popularity in the North Caucasian republics – for example, in Chechnya it was supported by 99.51% of voters. Such facts pave the way for public speculation about massive electoral fraud, as it is hardly possible to achieve such a result without falsifications.

Russian president Dmitry Medvedev headed the ruling party's list during the elections and it seems that this helped United Russia to obtain 238 out of 450 seats. At the same time the Russian communist party won 92 seats (19.2% of votes), Just Russia – 64 seats (13.25% of votes) and the Liberal Democratic Party with its irremovable leader Vladimir Zhirinovskiy – 56 seats (12% of votes).

A Right-Wing Failure

It should be mentioned that there is still no sufficiently large right-centrist party in Russia, where the middle class represents a big part of the population and there is a growing demand for changes among the people. The so-called Liberal-Democratic Party actually tends to favor nationalist positions. An attempt to create the Right Cause party with aluminum and nickel tycoon Mikhail Prokhorov as its head came to a grievous end for its leader who was forced to resign amidst scandal in September. The party suffered a crushing defeat subsequently in the elections, and nowadays its new leader Andrey Dunaev is seriously considering the option of emigration.

Therefore, the State Duma will not represent a huge part of the Russian population with liberal views and it undermines the legitimacy of the legislative body. The main ideologist of United Russia, deputy head of the presidential administration Vladislav Surkov paid attention to this fact just after the elections, stating that Russia needs a new party of "irritated urban communities".

The election results clearly demonstrate that United Russia should move to make compromises and become more liberal although they will not significantly change the political spectrum represented in the Duma. If it does not change, it will increase the gap between the ruling elite and ordinary people. Citizens of big cities, especially Moscow and Saint Petersburg, are tired of the same faces in power for such

extended periods of time and they actively expressed their voiced their opinions in the most recent elections.

Similarities and Differences with Belarus

Russian elections were similar to Belarusian electoral campaigns in many ways: the same pressure on independent observers ("Golos" organization), the same means of electoral falsifications (frauds with absentee ballots, fabricating results, throwing additional ballots in ballot boxes), preventive detentions (Sergey Udaltsov), mass protest actions followed by the arrests of opposition leaders (Ilya Yashin, Alexey Navalny, Sergey Mitrokhin) and the blocking of independent sources of information (Ekho Moskvyy radiostation site, "Big City" journal and Livejournal).

Nevertheless, elections were more democratic than in Belarus. There was no pressure on independent observers in the majority of voting stations, and opposition leaders could openly express their opinion in mass media and Parliament without any intervention from state authorities. This included well-known debates between Vladimir Zhirinovskyy and Alexander Khinshtein, when Zhirinovskyy harshly criticized United Russia, not troubling himself to be too careful with his choice of words.

What are the Implications for Belarus?

The Communist Party has strengthened its positions as a result of the elections. It traditionally [advocates](#) the interests of the Belarusian regime in Russia and personally Alyaksander Lukashenka. In its election program the party promises to defend Belarus from "Russian oligarchs". It could mean a potential increase in the influence of the Belarusian lobby in Moscow.

However, this election is incapable of considerably altering the state of relations between Belarus and Russia. At the same time the importance of the Eurasian Union project may rise in importance in order to show the effectiveness of the Russian

authorities' foreign policy, given a sharp fall in public trust in the ruling elite.

It creates favourable conditions for Belarus in the framework of cooperation with Russia and it means that Russia will close its eyes to various controversial events that take place in its neighbouring state. Particularly, one should not wait for new video appeals of the Russian president to revive the investigation of notorious political disappearances in Belarus.

Elections and Belarusian-Russian Relations

Russian presidential elections will have crucial importance for the future of this country with prime minister Vladimir Putin as the main candidate. It is hard to define what will be his level of support given mass demonstrations in Moscow and his native town of Saint-Petersburg. Today there are proposals in mass media to nominate a single opposition candidate – communist leader Gennady Zyuganov or blogger Alexey Navalny.

One will be able to define Putin's true intentions towards the Eurasian Union and the level of Russia's willingness to pay for further integration only after the 2012 presidential elections in Russia. Then the Russian authorities will finalize their domestic and foreign policy for a middle-term perspective (5-6 years). The dynamics of Belarusian-Russian relations depends exactly on these two issues that can either promote or undermine the European ambitions of Belarus.

It may be that following the presidential elections, the Russian authorities will increase the pressure on Belarus again to obtain its remaining [assets](#) in the absence of any competition from the West.

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